

Learn how to earn respect

The ability to influence others is crucial to leadership, but gaining it – and retaining it – requires effort.



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Moving from valued contributor to a position of influence is a step too far for many. They want it, but they don't get there because they don't pay attention to the foundations that influence-building requires.

Influence is more than a position on an organisational chart. According to University of Maryland sociologists Jeff Lucas and Amy Baxter, influence compels others to act because of the “respect and esteem in which one is held”. Influence gets people to act without inducements of reward or threats of punishment.

But increasing the impact you have on others requires patient and purposeful effort. Here are some ideas for establishing the strong foundations you will need.

1. From monologue to dialogue

Many organisational conversations (particularly around subject matter expertise) are essentially your monologue to others, and theirs to you. To increase influence, you need to be comfortable in dialogue with others. This requires suspending judgment, even for a little while, and exploring shared understanding. In their book *Talk, Inc.*, Boris Groysberg and Michael Slind highlight the creative power that can be produced by engaging in dialogue. It can open up previously unseen elements of the organisational system you are in, and enhance your capacity to manage up and around you in a way that is valuable and noticed.

2. Stay with the grey

Dialogue can feel like letting go of control, or an uncomfortable retreat from the expertise you have spent years building. But time spent in such grey areas will increase your comfort with ambiguity, and change how others perceive you. Ronald Heifetz, author of *Leadership Without the Easy Answers*, says tolerating ambiguity is a leadership quality worth focusing on when facing adaptive developmental challenges. The path to influence-building will be lined with ambiguities – and that's OK.

3. Don't be a doormat

Playing too compliantly will not do your influence-building intentions any good. As Wharton Professor Adam Grant points out, generous contributors (a group he calls “givers”) who are also doormats for others will inhibit their career advancement. Ask open-ended questions before accepting all that is directed to you. This might reveal someone better placed to do it, or an opportunity for collaboration.

4. Blind spots – own them

We all have blind spots – behaviours or mannerisms that can undermine attempts to build influence. It is easy to be defensive about “feedback surprises”, but important to recognise that other perspectives are just as real as your own. If you have had a 360 review, look deeply into the data. Speak to trusted peers and mentors, or an experienced executive coach. Sheena Heen and Douglas Stone, co-authors of *Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving*

Feedback Well, recommend asking, “What's one thing you see me doing, or failing to do, that holds me back?”

5. Show a different side in groups

Becoming more comfortable with dialogue can be extended to group settings. “Read the room” by paying attention to others' verbal and non-verbal cues. Look for opportunities to be a facilitator of group dialogue when you don't know the answer. Engage through open-ended questions such as, “I'm interested in hearing how that might work”, which enable group creativity and wider understanding.

6. Let your body match your intentions

Unfamiliar territory will sometimes be stressful. Being aware of what you do with your body at important times can help you. Harvard social psychologist Amy Cuddy's research, summarised in her TED Talk “Your body language may shape who you are”, is relevant to moments of potential influence-building. Expansive physical postures can build confidence that can help you be at your best in stressful group situations.

7. Your online brand matters

As your influence builds, you will be Googled. Ensure your professional online presence aligns with where you wish to go. Platforms such as LinkedIn can also be useful to highlight areas of interest through posts and sharing articles. Use your passion and expertise to promote dialogue.

8. Help others grow

Gaining a reputation as a developer of others will serve your influence-building well. As leadership expert John C. Maxwell aptly puts it: “A leader who produces other leaders multiplies their influence.” A positive path to real influence means recognising your subordinates with generosity, acknowledgment and developmental support. They matter.

Gaining real influence is not about being the smartest, loudest or most Machiavellian person in the room. Influence-building requires being attuned to others. It won't happen overnight – you have foundations to establish and grow in the interactions that matter. Are you ready to build?